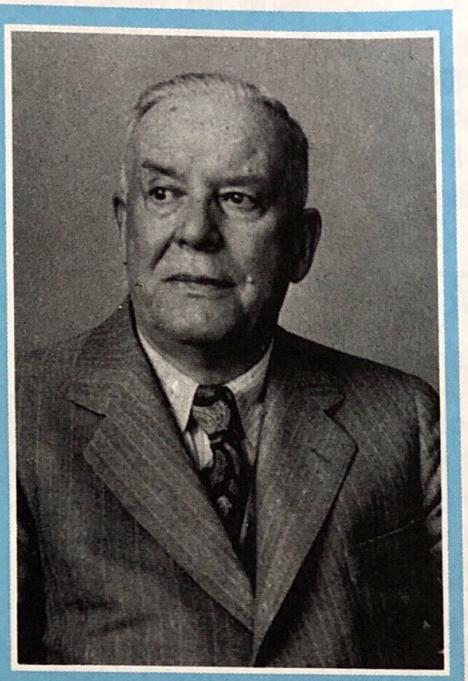
WALLACE STEVENS

1879–1955



Wallace Stevens believed that the goal of poetry is to capture the interaction of the imagination and the real world. As a result he spent his career writing poems that delve into the ways in which the physical world is perceived through the imagination.

Stevens was born and raised in Reading, Pennsylvania. After graduating from Harvard, he worked briefly as a journalist before attending law school. He practiced law for a short time, then took a job in the legal department of an insurance company in Hartford, Connecticut. Eventually he became the company's vice-president.

Stevens did not publish his first collection of poetry, *Harmonium* (1923), until he was over forty. Although the book received little recognition from the general public, it earned praise from critics and other poets. In the poems in this book, Stevens uses dazzling imagery to capture the beauty of the physical world, while expressing the dependence of this beauty on the perceptions of the observer.

During the second half of his life, Stevens published many more volumes of poetry, including *Ideas of Order* (1935), *Parts of a World* (1942), *Transport to Summer* (1947), *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950), and *Collected Poems* (1955), which earned him the Pulitzer Prize. Despite his success as a poet, however, Stevens continued his career in insurance. He rarely appeared in public and only began giving readings toward the end of his life.

While Stevens's early poems explore the ways in which the imagination shapes reality, his later work tends to be more abstract. He began focusing on such philosophical subjects as death and humanity's relationship with nature. Instead of exploring different ways of perceiving reality, he delved into different ways of contemplating and comprehending reality.

In *The Necessary Angel,* a slim book about poetry and reality, Stevens wrote, "There is, in fact, a world of poetry indistinguishable from the world in which we live, or, I ought to say, no doubt, from the world in which we shall come to live, since what makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it."

Throughout his career, however, Stevens's goal as a poet was "to help people live their lives." Stevens believed that life in the Modern Age was often uncertain and confusing, and that it was the duty of the poet to provide new ways of understanding the world. By writing poems that help us to see our role in shaping reality, he was able to accomplish his goal.

GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING

Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock; Anecdote of the Jar

Literary Movements

Symbolism. Like many other writers of his time, Stevens was influenced by Symbolism, a literary movement that originated in France in the last half of the nineteenth century. Because people perceive the physical world in different ways, the Symbolist poets believed that the ideas and emotions that people experience are personal and difficult to communicate. As a result these poets avoided directly stating their own ideas and emotions in their poetry. Instead they tried to convey meaning through clusters of symbols—people, places, objects, or actions that have meanings in themselves and also represent something larger than themselves. Because of this reliance on symbols, Symbolist poems can often be interpreted in a number of different ways. Similarly many of Stevens's poems can be interpreted in more than one way.

Commentary

As you read Wallace Stevens's poetry, you will notice that his symbols encompass what is real as well as what is not real. Dreams and the imagination are intermixed with concrete objects. Does concrete reality exist outside our imaginations? How does imagination shape our experience of the real world? These are questions Stevens considered. He wanted "not ideas about the thing but the thing itself," as he suggested in another poem. Poetry, he felt, joins imagination and the real world. Consider these ideas as you read "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" and "Anecdote of the Jar."

Focus

In "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" the subject is people's dreams. Freewrite about dreams and their meanings. How do dreams relate to a person's life? What can dreams reveal about a person? How can people be affected by their dreams?

Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock

Wallace Stevens

The houses are haunted
By white night-gowns.
None are green,
Or purple with green rings,
Or green with yellow rings,
Or yellow with blue rings.
None of them are strange,
With socks of lace
And beaded ceintures.
People are not going
To dream of baboons and periwinkles.
Only, here and there, an old sailor,
Drunk and asleep in his boots,
Catches tigers
In red weather.

Responding to the Selection

Your Response

1. Has reading this poem affected the way you perceive your life? Explain.
2. How would you describe your dreams?
3. Would you like to dream of "baboons and periwinkles" or to catch "tigers in red weather"? Explain.

Interpreting

4. In this poem Stevens contrasts an interesting, imaginative way of life with a dull, unimaginative way of life. (a) How does Stevens develop this contrast through his description of nightgowns? (b) How does his description of dreams further develop the contrast?
5. (a) Considering the poem's title and the reference to the houses as "haunted," which way of life do you think Stevens favors? (b) What comment does he seem to be making about modern life?

Applying

6. (a) What are some other things Stevens could have used to symbolize an unimaginative way of life? (b) What are some other things he could have used to symbolize an imaginative way of life?

Thinking and Writing

Responding to a Statement

Stevens felt that the goal of a poet was "to help people live their lives." Write an essay in which you discuss Stevens's comment in relation to the poem you have just read. Does it help people to live their lives? If so, how? When you finish writing, revise your essay, making sure that you have included enough evidence to thoroughly support your argument.

Anecdote of the Jar

Wallace Stevens

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

Responding to the Selection

Your Response

1. What type of painting or drawing would you select to illustrate "Anecdote of the Jar"? Explain.

Interpreting

2. In your own words, describe the jar's effect on the wilderness.
3. How is the impression of the jar that the speaker conveys in the third stanza different from that conveyed in the first two stanzas?

Applying

4. What types of objects do people create that have a dramatic effect on nature?

Analyzing Literature

Interpreting Symbolism

Symbolism was a literary movement that originated in France in the late nineteenth century and that influenced many English and American writers of the twentieth century. The Symbolist poets avoided directly stating ideas and emotions in their poetry. Instead they suggested meaning through the use of symbols.

How does this poem reflect the influence of the Symbolist poets?

Critical Thinking and Reading

Supporting an Interpretation

Because of the Symbolists' reliance on symbols, their poetry can often be interpreted in several ways. Similarly, many of Wallace Stevens's poems can be interpreted in more than one way.

Find evidence in the poem to support each of the following interpretations.

1. The jar symbolizes the human imagination, and the poem points out how the appearance of nature is shaped by our perceptions. The poem also points out that our imaginations depend on the physical world for input.
2. The jar symbolizes human interference with nature, and the poem explores the effects of human creations on nature.